

Suites In Detroit's Fox Theatre Still Popular 10 Years After Renovation

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It was 10 years ago this year that Olympia Entertainment finished renovation of the elegant Fox Theatre in Detroit. At that time, the company took its "arena frame of mind" into the theater business, and the Fox Theatre hasn't been the same since.

Company officials needed the theater to balance out its venue offerings that already included the 20,000-seat Joe Louis Arena and the 12,000-seat Cobo Hall. It needed a smaller, more intimate stage for "upcoming, young acts and acts on the wane of their careers," said Allan Vella, senior director with Olympia Entertainment and general manager of the 5,000-seat Fox Theatre.

At the time of the renovation, a unique decision was made. "We decided to build 17 suites in what was the mezzanine," Vella told AB. "We realized suites had never been built in a theater like this, but they had always been popular for us in other venues. Entertainment is a key component to business in [Detroit](#) and suites can play an important part in that entertainment mix."

Since then, the 14-20-person suites, tucked in under the balcony on the second floor of the facility, have "provided a unique revenue source for the theater," he added. "The suites have benefited our pro forma and have definitely promoted additional use of the theater."

The suites are leased on three-year cycles and they have been sold out since the beginning, he noted, adding there is a waiting list. Nearly 50% of the occupants have renewed since the beginning.

The suite level concourse is exclusive to [suite](#) holders and there is a private entrance to the level if the people want to use it. "The private entrance is across the street from the parking garage where suite holders get priority parking. Once the car is parked, we have a uniformed employee walk the guests across the street to the entrance."

The attendant is dressed as a 1920s bellman, the era of the theater. "Our goal is to give everyone the highest level of personal attention we can," he said. If guests prefer, they can enter the theater through the front doors and walk up the grand staircase to the suite level.

Prior to each performance, a complimentary buffet dinner is available on the suite level. There are carved items, as well as an assortment of fresh salads, five or six entrees and fresh sauteed pasta. The menu changes for each event and there is bar and waitress service to each suite. Guests may take the food back to their respective suites, or they can dine at one of the tables in the concourse.

The price of each suite, which Vella would not disclose, includes tickets to each event in the building. The number of tickets per suite is based on the number of seats available in each particular suite. Suite holders have no choice of events, and are not permitted to resell the tickets. There is no guarantee of the number of events, but the venue has been presenting between 200 and 215 performances a year.

Unlike many such theaters across the country, food and drink are permitted to be taken to the seats.

"Remember, we came from the arena side of the industry, not the theater side. We learned many lessons over there and when we took over this theater, we applied those lessons to the operations here." [Olympia Entertainment](#) is owned by the Ilitch Family, which among other properties, owns Little Caesars Pizza restaurants.

"We are restaurant people by nature, so we know how to conduct a lucrative food and drink service. It made sense to allow food and beverage in the theater."

On the other hand, he said the management is sensitive to performers and that for some shows, the policy will change. "In all, I'd say food can be taken into the theater for 80% of the events we do here."

Among the events are Broadway shows such as "Wizard of Oz" and "Cats," variety shows such as David Copperfield and the [Radio City Music Hall](#) Christmas Spectacular, and family shows, including "Rugrats," "Sesame Street" and "Goosebumps."

There are also many concerts, of all genres, he said. "We do everything here because we want this building to be viable for the entire community, not just one segment or one demographic."

Brass Ring Productions of Livonia, Mich., has exclusive booking rights to the facility. "We cannot present the real big shows because our stage is only 32 feet deep," he said. "We finally had to build a scenery shed outside the back of the building for storage of scenery and costumes."

The facility hosts more than 600,000 guests a year and has been voted as the state's most popular [tourist attraction](#), Vella said.